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## SONG MY INQUEST

# For the prosecution, idealism

The news that two American generals, including the commander of West Point, General Samuel Koster, and twelve other high-ranking officers are to be court-martialled for withholding information about the alleged massacre by US soldiers of more than 100 civilians at Song My in March 1968 may have astonished the French even more than the American public.

France's military tradition is such that legal proceedings against army officers seem all but inconceivable. Many atrocities were committed during the Algerian war, for example, but the sanctions taken were consistently aimed at the people who exposed them, never at the French military. These charges can only be explained in the light of American idealism. Europeans often smile at this notion, perhaps because the Americans' actions often seem out of keeping with their principles. Nevertheless, no one can deny that it colours their thinking and behaviour.

### The rules violated

For years the American people were convinced that their "boys" were fighting a just war in Vietnam and that the GIs always conducted themselves honourably. The French, with their long experience of colonial wars and insurrections, were sceptical, and the

revelation of the Song My incident hardly came as a surprise to them.

On the other hand, few French expected the men and officers held responsible to be court-martialled. American reaction was just the opposite. At first, the public found it hard to believe that any American soldier could commit this sort of crime. But with mounting evidence that the massacre actually occurred, the arrest of the men followed naturally from it. The rules of the game had been violated, and justice had to be done.

In the past hundred years the US has never experienced the horrors of war on its own soil. American soldiers have fought abroad, in Europe, the Pacific, Korea and Vietnam. It is hardly surprising that for Americans war often seems an abstract thing rather than a cruel and fierce struggle for life in which anything can happen, even if it runs counter to the rules.

The lack of a long military tradition in the United States is also a factor in the charges brought against this group of high-ranking officers. It was only in 1941, when the US realized it would have to enter the war against Japan and Germany in order to preserve its world influence, that the country began building a permanent military establishment of real size. Between the two world wars, Amer-

ican professional army stood at about 100,000 men.

The Cold War, and especially the Korean conflict, extended the need for a powerful, permanent military machine; and the needs of America's professional army have now swelled to a total of 900,000 men.

The newness of the US military establishment accounts for its relatively vulnerable position of its commanding officers compared with their European counterparts. America's professional soldiers have not yet had the time to transform themselves into guardians and paragons of the national virtue. Some generals, of course, have tried: General Douglas MacArthur's defiance of President Harry Truman in Korea was an example. But General MacArthur finally bowed to authority after he was relieved of his command, and refused to carry the fight into the political arena, as some of his supporters urged him to do at the time.

In much the same way, the domestic crisis caused by the prolongation of the Vietnam war has produced nothing comparable to the French Secret Army Organization (OAS), which used terrorism in a vain attempt to "keep Algeria French." The American Army is tightly integrated into the nation, and considers its role to be limited to the service of that nation.